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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000357

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: INITIAL TAKE FROM DAMASCUS ON DOHA AGREEMENT ON  
LEBANON

REF: A. DAMASCUS 348

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 349

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1  
.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With President Asad in Aleppo and FM Muallem in Bahrain, SARG reactions in Damascus have been slow to emerge. FM Muallem expressed the SARG's support of "all that the brethren in Lebanon agree on," and we understand Bashar has been in close contact with the Qataris. Syria's position up to now has emphasized the importance of converting Hizballah's gains on the ground into political victory. Bashar remained aloof from the proceedings in Doha until the end game, when (as some in Beirut have reported) he leaned heavily on Nabi Berri to pressure Hizballah and Aoun after they mounted a last minute effort to scuttle the deal. Some in the SARG still would like to see Siniora and others ousted and a pro-Syrian PM installed, but others believe a coming realignment in the Sunni camp because of Saad Hariri's performance will lead to a different Sunni PM. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) We have few data points with which to judge the SARG's assessment of the latest news from Doha. Bashar is on vacation in Aleppo, and FM Muallem was visiting South Africa and Bahrain. According to MFA Advisor Samir al-Taqi, Bashar purposely limited his involvement in the Doha negotiations but followed them close enough to intervene at the last moment. As others in Beirut have reported (and al-Taqi confirmed for us), Michel Aoun attempted to scuttle the deal; factions within Hizballah reportedly supported Aoun's position, putting the agreement in jeopardy. The Qataris called Bashar and asked him to intervene. According to al-Taqi, Bashar immediately phoned Nabi Berri and issued a strong appeal that the deal must go through. Berri conveyed Bashar's message and Hizballah backed down, leaving Aoun politically exposed and without support.

[1](#)3. (C) Our main assumptions about Syria's position include:

-- Bashar's focus appears to be on consolidating power and portraying himself as a moderate Sunni leader (in spite of his Alewite identity.) His June travel plans include stops in India, the UAE, and Kuwait. Syrian support for the Doha framework, which mirrors the principles Syria has advocated since November 2007, will show him as pushing for stability in Lebanon, rather than a Hizballah takeover. He can also

rebut any accusations that Syria's true ambition is to march its army back into Lebanon.

-- The blocking third, a new election law, and Sleiman's performance in the last two weeks all but guarantee the next GOL will be unable to address the issue of Hizballah's arms, which remains the sine qua non of Syria's equities, according to al Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi.

-- Still, sources like Reuters correspondent Khaled Oweiss argue that Syria's "hard-liners," i.e., those that advocated aggressive measures by Syrian allies against the March 14 government since 2005 and before, continue to spread paranoia about a U.S.-backed Lebanese government and will likely see the Doha agreement as a partial victory. The Syrian public's sense of betrayal by the anti-Syrian sentiments coming from Lebanon will work in favor of Syrian security service policy recommendations. Even though Hizballah's military gains have been converted in to a blocking third of the cabinet, the question of who will be the Prime Minister may represent an equally important issue to some in Damascus. There are others like al-Taqi who argue that the likely result of the Doha process will be a realignment, especially within the Sunni camp, that will lead to a shift of loyalties and leaders.

-- We are hearing whispers that Hizballah's gains may actually represent a reduction of Syrian influence in Lebanon. Syria's control of the military supply line remains its ultimate source of power, but this is a card Syria will be hardpressed to leverage without harming already stressed relations with Hizballah and Iran, particularly after the

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Mugniyah assassination. According to some sources, Syria's handling of Mugniyah's assassination and subsequent investigation are still cause for suspicion in Tehran and within Hizballah. Syrians returning from Lebanon have told sources here that Hizballah soldiers purposefully sought to replace them in Lebanese hotels, and that the travel of Hizballah operatives to Damascus has decreased significantly.

-- While Syria will publicly support the Doha agreement, we expect it to use its influence to protect the interests of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and other proxies in Lebanon.

14. (C) As the ultimate source of authority, Bashar's main focus continues to be consolidating his power, but he appears to lack a long term vision. According to Hamidi, Bashar was confident enough to take the controversial moves to reduce fuel oil subsidies and push other unpopular economic reforms. At the same time, he also has announced ongoing indirect discussion with Israel on the Golan. These two moves have threatened entrenched interests of the Baath Party and put Iran and Hizballah on notice that Syria's long term interests may eventually diverge from their desire to continue a proxy war against Israel.

15. (C) The Doha agreement thus comes at a time of reassessment. It represents a positive outcome from Syria's perspective, but supporting it will require balancing moderates and aggressive hard-liners who want to maximize Syria's gains. There remains concern about a pro-U.S. GOL that could seek to embarrass Syria via the UNIIC and by exposing Syrian ties to Hizballah. Given his strong focus on repairing Syria's international and regional image, Bashar now seeks to turn Doha to his advantage in the Sunni Arab world. The SARG security services will nonetheless press hard for settling old scores with anti-Syrian politicians in Lebanon by further trying to marginalize them.

CORBIN